

PAPER

Struck off the American Press: Books Between Protestant Ideals and Arab Secular Desires

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines secular publications that were edited, supervised, compiled and/or commissioned by local Arab Christian scholars at the Presbyterian American Syria Mission's press in Beirut during the mid nineteenth century. These examples of literature, poetry, Arabic grammar, science and geography were produced during the 1840s and 1850s, when the American mission began loaning out its print shop to members of an expanding print intelligentsia, such as Nasif al-Yaziji and Butrus al-Bustani, who sought to publish their own works. I explore how these local scholars' secular works, in their organizational methods, formats and graphic conventions of mirrored those of the American missionaries' ecclesiastical publications at the time, which exemplified a distinctly Protestant message and a Spartan text-based aesthetic. To understand the unique nature of these publications by Arab scholars in Beirut, I illustrate how they differed from contemporaneous books printed at other presses in nearby Cairo, Tabriz and Istanbul, which were elaborately decorated and relied on the visual language of local illuminated devotional manuscripts. Although books by intellectuals like al-Yaziji and al-Bustani clearly diverged from regional Middle Eastern printing conventions by adopting a "Protestant aesthetic," I argue that these scholars' secular publications represented emergent views of modernity, westernization and secularism dissociated from the American mission's religious context and perspectives. As such, this paper illustrates an early period in Arabic printing during which printed pages were dynamic sites of tension and collaboration between local scribal traditions and western press conventions, missionary goals and communal concerns, and religious and secular thought.